



12
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ANNUAL

ACTION

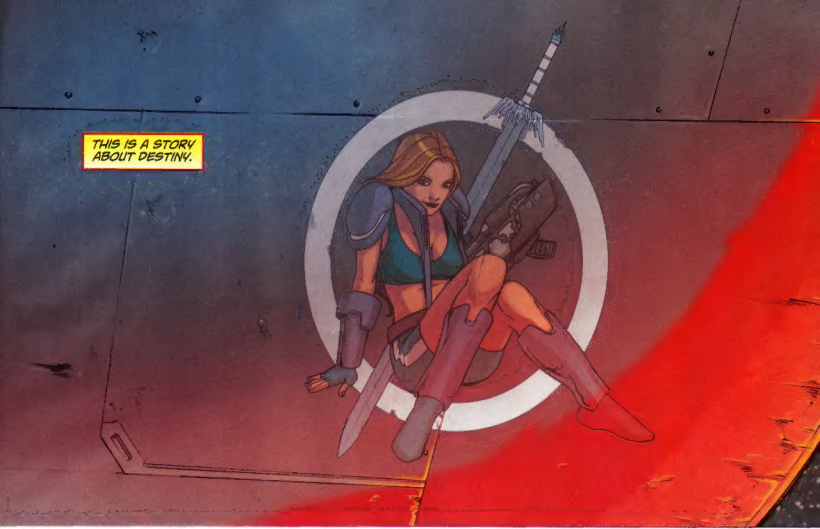
COMICS

GREG
RUCKA
PERE
PÉREZ

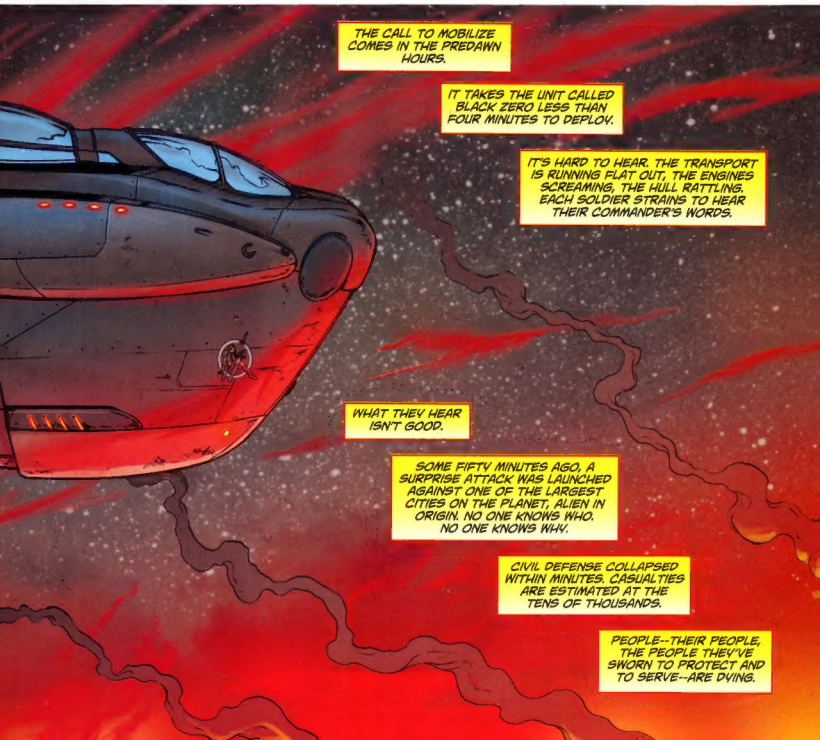


AT LAST!
THE ORIGIN OF NIGHTWING AND FLAMEBIRD!





THIS IS A STORY
ABOUT DESTINY.



THE CALL TO MOBILIZE
COMES IN THE PREDAWN
HOURS.

IT TAKES THE UNIT CALLED
BLACK ZERO LESS THAN
FOUR MINUTES TO DEPLOY.

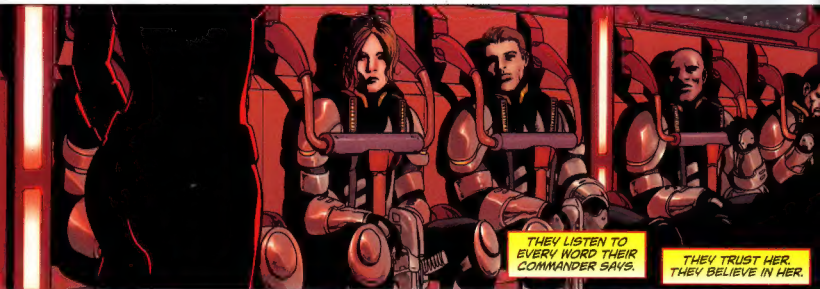
IT'S HARD TO HEAR. THE TRANSPORT
IS RUNNING FLAT OUT, THE ENGINES
SCREAMING, THE HULL RATTLING.
EACH SOLDIER STRAINS TO HEAR
THEIR COMMANDER'S WORDS.

WHAT THEY HEAR
ISN'T GOOD.

SOME FIFTY MINUTES AGO, A
SURPRISE ATTACK WAS LAUNCHED
AGAINST ONE OF THE LARGEST
CITIES ON THE PLANET, ALIEN IN
ORIGIN. NO ONE KNOWS WHO.
NO ONE KNOWS WHY.

CIVIL DEFENSE COLLAPSED
WITHIN MINUTES. CASUALTIES
ARE ESTIMATED AT THE
TENS OF THOUSANDS.

PEOPLE--THEIR PEOPLE,
THE PEOPLE THEY'VE
SWORN TO PROTECT AND
TO SERVE--ARE DYING.



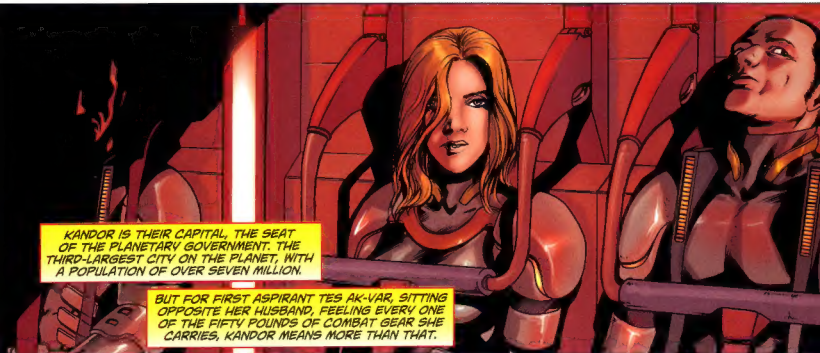
THEY LISTEN TO
EVERY WORD THEIR
COMMANDER SAYS.

THEY TRUST HER.
THEY BELIEVE IN HER.

IF ANYONE IS GOING TO
GET THEM OUT OF THIS
ALIVE, IT'S HER.

SHE TELLS THEM WHERE
THEY'RE GOING.

OUR
TARGET IS
KANDOR.

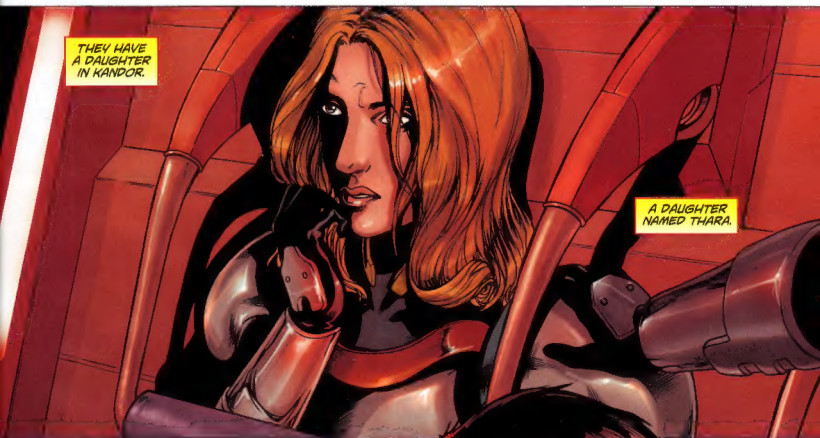


KANDOR IS THEIR CAPITAL, THE SEAT
OF THE PLANETARY GOVERNMENT. THE
THIRD-LARGEST CITY ON THE PLANET. WITH
A POPULATION OF OVER SEVEN MILLION.

BUT FOR FIRST ASPIRANT TES AK-VAR, SITTING
OPPOSITE HER HUSBAND, FEELING EVERY ONE
OF THE FIFTY POUNDS OF COMBAT GEAR SHE
CARRIES, KANDOR MEANS MORE THAN THAT.



SHE AND HER HUSBAND,
ASPIRANT MAJOR AK-VAR,
HAVE FAMILY IN KANDOR.



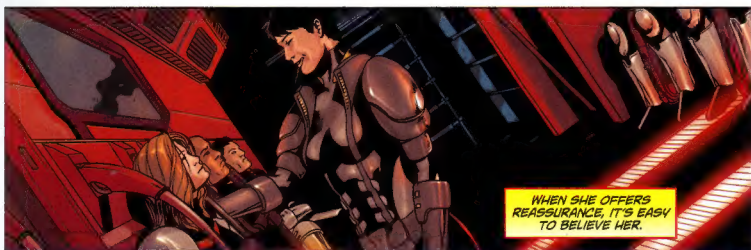
THEY HAVE
A DAUGHTER
IN KANDOR.

A DAUGHTER
NAMED THARA.



THEIR COMMANDER,
URSA, KNOWS THIS,
TOO.

IT'LL BE
ALL RIGHT,
YES.



WHEN SHE OFFERS REASSURANCE, IT'S EASY TO BELIEVE HER.



SHE'S THEIR LEADER.

SQUAD,
ON YOUR FEET!



IF ANYONE IS GOING TO GET THEM OUT OF THIS ALIVE...

WE ARE THE BEST KRYPTON HAS TO OFFER!

WE ARE KRYPTON'S SWORD AND ITS SHIELD!

GENERAL ZOD SENDS US, BECAUSE WE WILL GET THE JOB DONE!

NOT FOR HIM, NOT FOR THE COUNCIL, BUT FOR OUR PEOPLE!

...IT'S HER.



BLACK ZERO! TO VICTORY!



THEY HIT THE GROUND RUNNING,
WORKING BLOCK TO BLOCK,
STREET BY STREET, DEEPER INTO
THE HEART OF THE CITY.

THE ENTIRE TIME, THEIR
SENSES ARE ASSAULTED BY
THE CARNAGE AROUND THEM.

THE AIR REEKS WITH
THE SMELL OF BLOOD,
SMOKE, AND DEATH.

SCREAMS DISAPPEAR BEHIND
EXPLOSIONS, SOBS ECHO
AMID THE RUBBLE. PARENTS
CALL OUT TO CHILDREN.
INFANTS HOWL IN TERROR.



AND EVERYWHERE
THEY GO, THEY SEE
CORPSES, AND THIS
CONFIRMS THEIR
WORST FEARS.



THESE ALIENS, THEY'RE HERDING
A SEGMENT OF THE POPULACE
TO THE CENTER OF THE CITY.

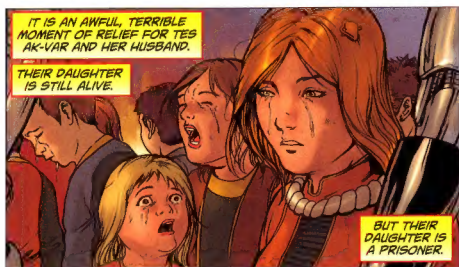
FOR WHAT REASON,
NO ONE CAN GUESS.



THOSE THAT AREN'T BEING
HERDED ARE BEING CULLED.



YES!



IT IS AN AWFUL, TERRIBLE
MOMENT OF RELIEF FOR TES
AK-VAR AND HER HUSBAND.

THEIR DAUGHTER
IS STILL ALIVE.

BUT THEIR DAUGHTER IS
A PRISONER.



YES, AK, YOU'RE WITH ME.

THE REST OF YOU, PLANK AND GIVE COVER.



NOW!

MOM! DAD!

KIK KOK KIK

FOR THARA AK-VAR, IT IS THE PENULTIMATE MOMENT OF A CHILD'S NIGHTMARE.



THWP

THWP

THWP

THWP

KIK KOK KIK KOK

KIK KOK

IT IS A MOMENT SHE WILL NEVER FORGET.



HER PARENTS HAVE COME TO SAVE HER.

KIK KOK KIK KOK KIK

SPLAT

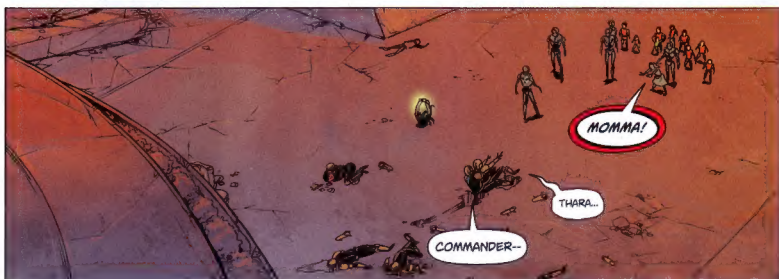
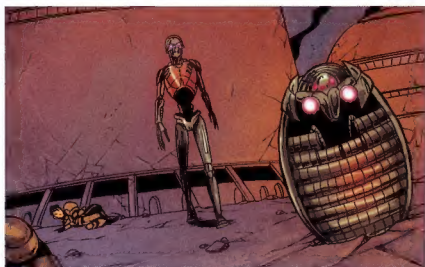
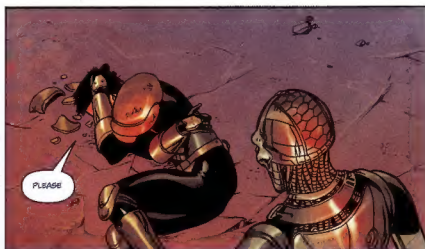
IT TAKES THREE SECONDS, MAYBE FOUR.

KIK KOK KIK KOK KIK



RAO...

AND THEN BLACK ZERO, THE PRIDE OF THE KRYPTONIAN ARMY, IS NO MORE.





SEVEN MILLION
SOULS LIVED IN
KANDOR.

NO NO
MOMMA DADDY
NO!!!



ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND OF
THEM WERE ULTIMATELY
COLLECTED AND TRAPPED BEHIND
THE FORCE FIELD WALLS.



ONE HUNDRED
THOUSAND OF
THEM TAKEN BY
THE ALIEN ENTITY
CALLED BRAINIAC.

NO NO
NO NO...



THEY WERE THE
LUCKY ONES.

EVERYONE ELSE
WAS SLAUGHTERED.

IN THE TERRIFYING DAYS THAT FOLLOW THEIR ABDUCTION, KANDOR STRUGGLES TO RECOVER FROM WHAT HAS HAPPENED.

THE BODIES OF THE DEAD ARE BURNED, THE SOULS OF THE DEPARTED ESCORTED BACK TO RAO ON PRAYERS OF THE RELIGIOUS GUILD.

SLOWLY, THE REALIZATION DAWNS THAT THEIR JAILOR'S INTEREST IN THEM IS LIMITED.

TO BRAINIAC, THE ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND KRYPTONIANS TRAPPED IN THE BOTTLE CITY ARE ANTS IN A FARM, TO BE OBSERVED, NOTHING MORE.

A SMALL COMFORT WHEN FAMILIES HAVE BEEN TORN APART AND SLAUGHTERED, WHEN FRIENDS AND LOVERS HAVE BEEN LOST.

NOT ONE SURVIVOR FAILS TO EXHIBIT SYMPTOMS OF POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS. SLEEP IS PLAGUED WITH NIGHTMARES, DAYS AWASH IN DEPRESSION, IRRATIONAL ANGER, AND SORROW.

FACED WITH AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE, KANDOR STRUGGLES TO RE-ESTABLISH SOME OF WHAT HAS BEEN LOST, TO REBUILD SOME REPLICA OF KRYPTONIAN SOCIETY.

KANDOR'S ORPHANS ARE QUICKLY PLACED INTO DIFFERENT GUILDS.

LIKE HER PARENTS, AND THEIR PARENTS BEFORE THEM, THARA AK-VAR ENTERS SERVICE IN THE MILITARY GUILD.

THE HOPE IS THAT, ONE DAY, SHE AND THE REST OF HER GUILD WILL SEE COMBAT.

THE HOPE IS THAT, ONE DAY, THE PRISONERS OF KANDOR WILL SOMEHOW RISE UP, AND TAKE BACK THEIR FREEDOM.

AND ON THAT DAY, HAVING SECURED VICTORY...

...THEY WILL BE ABLE TO RETURN HOME.

FOR YEARS, THIS IS
THE HOPE THAT
SUSTAINS KANDOR.

UNTIL THE DAY THAT BRAINIAC
ENCOUNTERS ANOTHER GROUP OF
REFUGEES FROM KRYPTON. ARGO
CITY, DRIFTING IN THE VOID.

THE NEW ADDITIONS
ARE INCORPORATED
INTO THE BOTTLE CITY.

THE NEW ADDITIONS
BRING NEWS, AND THE
HOPE THAT HAS
SUSTAINED KANDOR
FINALLY, MISERABLY,
DIES IN ITS TELLING.

KRYPTON
IS GONE.

THEIR PRISON
IS NOW, AND
FOREVER WILL BE,
THEIR HOME.

FOR THARA AK-VAR, THE NEWS
IS HEARTBREAKING, BUT THE
MESSENGERS ARE WELCOME.

IN KANDOR, FOR ALL THESE YEARS,
SHE HAS BEEN ALONE, BUT NOW SHE
SEES PEOPLE SHE KNOWS, THE
PARENTS OF HER BEST FRIEND KARA.

THARA AK-VAR HAS
LOST HER MOTHER
AND FATHER.

ALURA ZOR-EL AND HER
HUSBAND HAVE LOST
THEIR DAUGHTER.

AND IF EACH OF THEM
KNOWS THE FAMILY
THEY NOW MAKE IS NOT
THE ONE THEY WOULD
HAVE CHOSEN...

...IT IS, AT LEAST, ONE THEY CAN FIND PEACE WITH.

FOR THE BOY NAMED LOR-ZOD BY HIS PARENTS, WHO CALLS HIMSELF CHRISTOPHER INSTEAD, THAT IS ONLY A DREAM.

HIS REALITY IS A NIGHTMARE.

CHRIS!

UP, UP AND AWAY

A KRYPTONIAN BY BIRTH, HE HAS NEVER KNOWN KRYPTON.

BORN INTO THE PRISON DIMENSION CALLED THE PHANTOM ZONE, HE HAS SPENT HIS FIRST SIX YEARS SURROUNDED BY THE CRIMINALLY INSANE AND THE IRREDEEMABLY EVIL.

NO--

SURROUNDED BY NEGLECT AND CRUELTY, IT IS ASTOUNDING THAT HE HAS EVEN SURVIVED.

AND IT IS A MIRACLE THAT, DESPITE ALL OF THAT, HE HAS JUST SACRIFICED THE ONLY HAPPINESS HE HAS EVER KNOWN TO SAVE A PLANET AND A PEOPLE HE HAS BARELY MET.

...MOM

SCORPUS

KA-EL--

--NININ
N-WHAT'S--

--HAPPENING
TO MEEE--

HE HAS RETURNED TO THE PHANTOM ZONE TO PREVENT THOSE WITHIN FROM EVER ESCAPING AGAIN.

AAAAHHH!

THAT IS ONLY THE BEGINNING OF THE PRICE HE WILL PAY.

THERE ARE ONLY THEORIES, NOW,
NO ANSWERS TO EXPLAIN WHAT
HAS HAPPENED TO HIM.

PERHAPS IT IS DUE TO THE
NATURE OF HIS BIRTH, THAT
HE IS, BY DEFINITION, AN
EXTRADIMENSIONAL BEING.

WHATEVER THE REASON, THE
RESULT IS THAT HIS BODY HAS,
IN THE SPACE OF SECONDS,
AGED SOME SIX YEARS.

PERHAPS THE PHANTOM ZONE
HAS, IN SOME WAY, ALTERED
HIS GENETIC STRUCTURE, AND
THAT, IN COMBINATION WITH
EXPOSURE TO EARTH'S
YELLOW SUN, A MUTATION
IS TRIGGERED.

HIS TROUBLES
DON'T END THERE.

THE NATURE OF THE PHANTOM ZONE IS SUCH
THAT THOSE WHO ARE SENTENCED TO IT REMAIN
INCORPOREAL, GHOSTS LOCKED IN TIME.

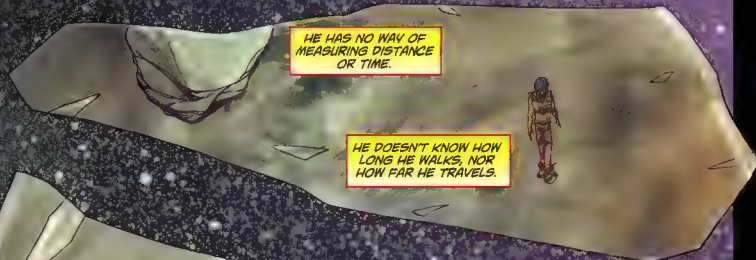
THEY DO NOT NEED TO EAT,
OR DRINK, NOR DO THEY NEED
REFUGE FROM THE UNENDING
COLD THAT SURROUNDS THEM.
THEY FEEL NOTHING.

CONCEIVED AND BIRTHED
IN THIS PLACE, HOWEVER,
CHRISTOPHER IS UNIQUE.

HIS BODY REMAINS AS
CORPOREAL, AS TANGIBLE,
AS IT WAS ON EARTH.

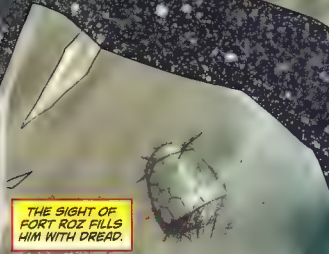
HE FEELS COLD.
HE FEELS HUNGER.

HE FEELS
ALONE.



HE HAS NO WAY OF
MEASURING DISTANCE
OR TIME.

HE DOESN'T KNOW HOW
LONG HE WALKS, NOR
HOW FAR HE TRAVELS.

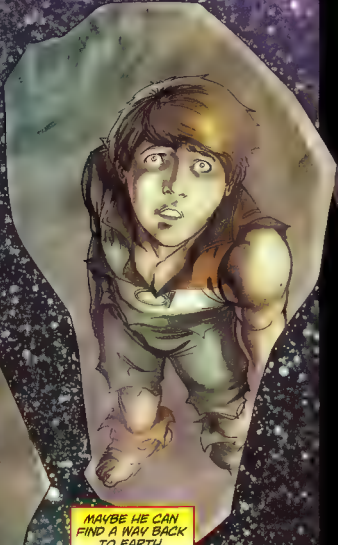


THE SIGHT OF
FORT ROZ FILLS
HIM WITH DREAD.

A KRYPTONIAN PRISON
THROWN INTO THE
PHANTOM ZONE, IT--
LIKE CHRISTOPHER--
REMAINS TANGIBLE.



WITHIN IT, HE CAN
FIND WARMTH AND
FOOD AND MAYBE
SOMETHING ELSE.



MAYBE HE CAN
FIND A WAY BACK
TO EARTH.

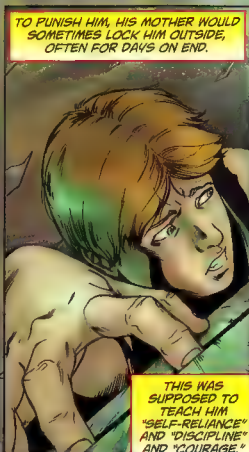


IF HE CAN GET PAST
HIS PARENTS, FIRST.



MOST OF HIS FIRST SIX YEARS WERE SPENT WITHIN THE PRISON'S WALLS, WHERE CHRIS WAS CONCEIVED AND BORN.

MOST, BUT NOT ALL.



TO PUNISH HIM, HIS MOTHER WOULD SOMETIMES LOCK HIM OUTSIDE, OFTEN FOR DAYS ON END.

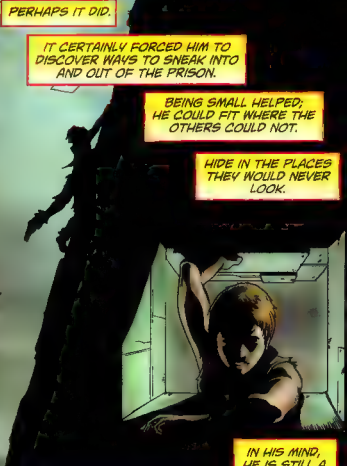
THIS WAS SUPPOSED TO TEACH HIM "SELF-RELIANCE" AND "DISCIPLINE" AND "COURAGE."

PERHAPS IT DID.

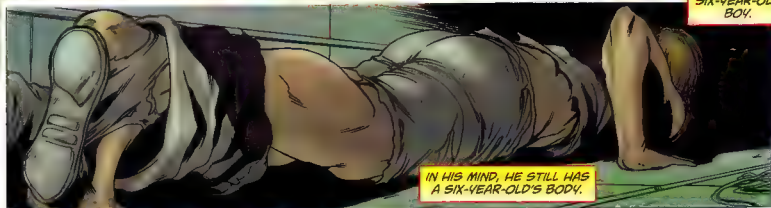
IT CERTAINLY FORCED HIM TO DISCOVER WAYS TO SNEAK INTO AND OUT OF THE PRISON.

BEING SMALL HELPED; HE COULD FIT WHERE THE OTHERS COULD NOT.

HIDE IN THE PLACES THEY WOULD NEVER LOOK.



IN HIS MIND, HE IS STILL A SIX-YEAR-OLD BOY.



IN HIS MIND, HE STILL HAS A SIX-YEAR-OLD'S BODY.



WHEN THAT BODY GETS STUCK, CONFUSION QUICKLY TURNS TO FEAR.

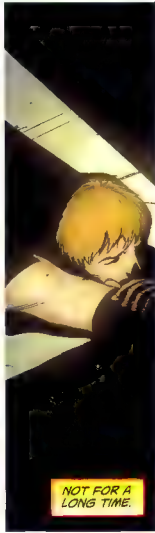


TRAPPED, HE STRUGGLES TO FREE HIMSELF, HIS RISING PANIC DESTROYING ANY DESIRE TO REMAIN HIDDEN.

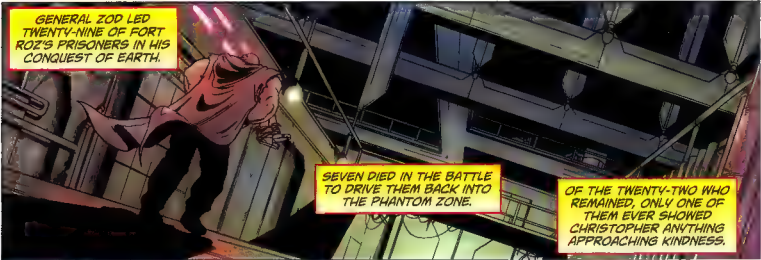
HE SCREAMS FOR HELP, NOT CARING THAT ANY WHO MIGHT HEAR IS AS LIKELY TO TORTURE HIM AS TO AID HIM.



NO HELP COMES.



NOT FOR A LONG TIME.



GENERAL ZOD LED
TWENTY-NINE OF FORT
ROZ'S PRISONERS IN HIS
CONQUEST OF EARTH.

SEVEN DIED IN THE BATTLE
TO DRIVE THEM BACK INTO
THE PHANTOM ZONE.

OF THE TWENTY-TWO WHO
REMAINED, ONLY ONE OF
THEM EVER SHOWED
CHRISTOPHER ANYTHING
APPROACHING KINDNESS.



NON HAS BEEN
CALLED MANY
THINGS: SIMPLE;
A BRUTE;
AN ANIMAL;
A SAVAGE.



ONCE, HIS MIND
WAS AS BRILLIANT
AS ANY KRYPTON
HAD EVER KNOWN.



UNTIL THOSE THINGS
WERE STOLEN FROM
HIM FOR THE CRIME
OF TELLING TRUTH
TO POWER.

HE WASN'T
ALWAYS THAT
WAY.

ONCE, THAT
BRILLIANCE WAS
ONLY MATCHED BY
HIS COMPASSION.



NON HAS THE
DISTINCTION OF
BEING THE ONLY
PERSON IN FORT
ROZ TO TREAT
CHRISTOPHER
WITH CONSISTENT
KINDNESS.

AND IF THEY WERE KINDRED
SPIRITS BEFORE, THE CHILD
AND THE CHILDLIKE MAN...



...NOW, EVEN MORE
SO, THEY SHARE
THE SAME PRISONS.

THE PHANTOM
ZONE, AND THEIR
OWN BODIES.



IN ANOTHER PRISON,
ANOTHER PRISONER
WRESTLES DEMONS
LESS DEFINED.

DAYS HAVE BECOME
WEEKS HAVE BECOME
YEARS IN KANDOR.

YET EVEN AFTER SO MUCH
TIME, SLEEP REMAINS
THARA AK-VAR'S ENEMY.

AS A CHILD, FIRE OFTEN
PLAYED A PART IN HER
DREAMS, AND THIS
NEVER ALARMED HER.

FIRE--RAO--IS A CONSTANT IN
KRYPTONIAN RELIGION, AND
BEFORE THE ABDUCTION, THARA
WAS CONSIDERED QUITE DEVOUT.

SOMETHING HER BEST FRIEND,
KARA ZOR-EL, OFTEN TEASED
HER ABOUT, IN FACT.



BUT WITH THE DEATH OF HER
PARENTS, THESE DREAMS HAVE
BECOME NIGHTMARES, AND THEY
HAVE NEVER GONE AWAY.

IN FACT, THEY HAVE
GOTTEN WORSE.

IN THE BEGINNING,
THERE WERE ONLY
FLAMES.

NOW, THOUGH,
THARA PERCEIVES
SOMETHING ELSE.

SOMETHING ALIVE
WITHIN THE FIRES.



SOMETHING AWESOME AND
TERRIBLE AND ANCIENT.

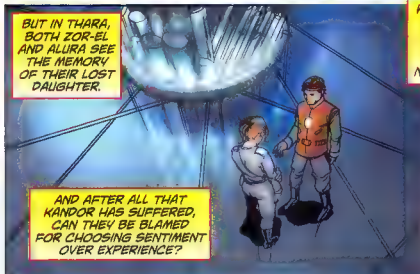
AND IT'S
WATCHING HER.

WHEN ZOR-EL, ELECTED WITH ALURA TO HEAD KANDOR'S GOVERNMENT, ASKED THARA TO BECOME HIS HEAD OF SECURITY, MANY WERE SURPRISED.



CERTAINLY, THERE WERE OTHERS IN THE MILITARY GUILD MORE QUALIFIED.

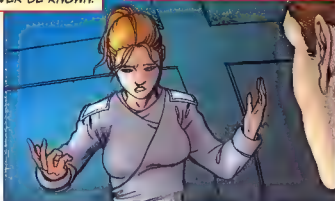
BUT IN THARA, BOTH ZOR-EL AND ALURA SEE THE MEMORY OF THEIR LOST DAUGHTER.



AND AFTER ALL THAT KANDOR HAS SUFFERED, CAN THEY BE BLAMED FOR CHOOSING SENTIMENT OVER EXPERIENCE?

WHETHER ZOR-EL SAW RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE IN WHAT THARA TOLD HIM WILL NEVER BE KNOWN.

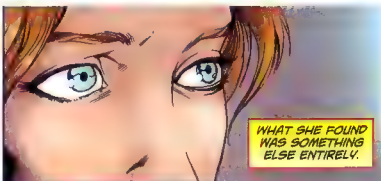
PERHAPS, UNABLE TO OFFER AN ANSWER TO HIS SURROGATE DAUGHTER THROUGH SCIENCE, HE OFFERED PHILOSOPHY.



PERHAPS HE SOUGHT ONLY TO REDIRECT HER TO THE CHURCH SHE HAD SINCE ABANDONED.



PERHAPS HE HOPED THAT, IN RELIGION, THARA MIGHT ONCE AGAIN FIND SOLACE, IF NOT A SOLUTION.



WHAT SHE FOUND WAS SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY.



WHAT SHE FOUND WAS A LEGACY.

KRYPTONIAN RELIGIOUS BELIEF HAS BEEN CHARACTERIZED AS POLYTHEISTIC, AKIN TO HINDUISM ON EARTH. THIS IS INACCURATE.

A BETTER ANALOGUE MIGHT BE CATHOLICISM, WITH RAO, THE SUN GOD, AS A MONOTHEISTIC DEITY, SURROUNDED BY NAMED "ANGELS," CYTHONNA, YUDA, AND THE LIKE.

OTHER ASPECTS OF THE RELIGION MIGHT BEST BE LIKENED TO TERRAN CABALS, OR EVEN CULTS, WITH LAYERS OF SECRETS CONCEALING FURTHER MYSTERIES.

THIS MAY EXPLAIN WHY THE RELIGIOUS GUILD IS SO SMALL IN COMPARISON TO THE OTHER GUILDS, AND WHY SO LITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT THEM.

OUTSIDE THE STANDARD LIFE-CYCLE EVENTS--BIRTH, MARRIAGE, DEATH--MOST KRYPTONIANS HAVE NO INTERACTION WITH THE CLERGY.

AND THE CLERGY ITSELF RARELY INTERACTS WITH THE REST OF SOCIETY.

AK-VAR.

IT SHOULD BE NOTED, HERE, THAT KRYPTONIAN NAMING CONVENTION USES A PERSONAL--"AK"--TO PRECEDE A FAMILIAL--"VAR."

AK-VAR.

AK-VAR.

FOR MALES, THIS SUFFICES. THUS THE HOUSE OF VAR WOULD HAVE SONS NAMED "KEM-VAR" OR "BYN-VAR."

FEMALE NAMES, HOWEVER, TAKE A PERSONAL--"TES" OR "THARA"--TO PRECEDE A HUSBAND OR FATHER--"AK-VAR."

AK-VAR.

AK-VAR.

AK-VAR.

THIS VARIATION MAKES THE GENERATIONAL REPEAT OF A SPECIFIC NAME, IN THIS CASE "AK-VAR," INCREDIBLY RARE.

YES

TO HEAR THARA AK-VAR TELL IT, THEY KNEW SHE WAS COMING.

TO HEAR THARA AK-VAR TELL IT, THEY HAD BEEN WAITING FOR HER.

SHE BELIEVES--ABSOLUTELY,
COMPLETELY, AND SINCERELY
BELIEVES--THAT WHAT SHE
EXPERIENCED NEXT WAS REAL.

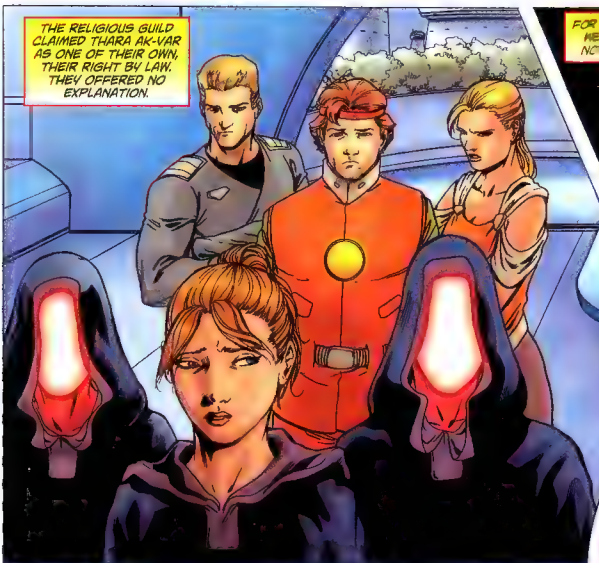
THAT IT WAS NOT A HALLUCINATION.
THAT IT WAS NOT SOME MANIPULATION
OF SUNSTONES KNOWN ONLY TO THE
RELIGIOUS GUILD.

THAT SHE WAS
GRANTED A VISION,
PERHAPS BY RAO
HIMSELF.

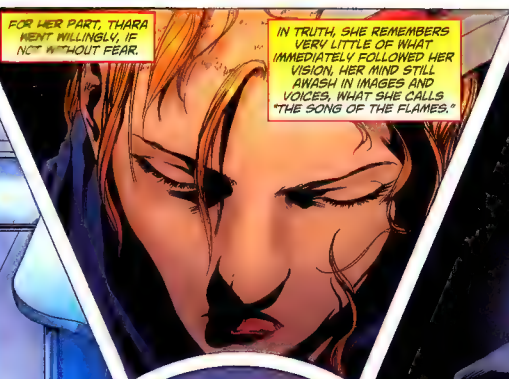
THAT THE TRUE FLAMEBIRD
APPEARED TO HER IN THE
CATHEDRAL, THE HALF-PHOENIX,
HALF-DRAGON SENTINEL OF
KRYPTONIAN LEGEND.

THAT THE FLAMEBIRD
SPOKE TO HER IN THE
ANCIENT WAY, MIND
TOUCHING MIND...

...AND SHARED ALL
HER SORROWS.



THE RELIGIOUS GUILD CLAIMED THARA AK-VAR AS ONE OF THEIR OWN, THEIR RIGHT BY LAW. THEY OFFERED NO EXPLANATION.



FOR HER PART, THARA WENT WILLINGLY, IF NOT WITHOUT FEAR.

IN TRUTH, SHE REMEMBERS VERY LITTLE OF WHAT IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWED HER VISION, HER MIND STILL AWASH IN IMAGES AND VOICES, WHAT SHE CALLS "THE SONG OF THE FLAMES."



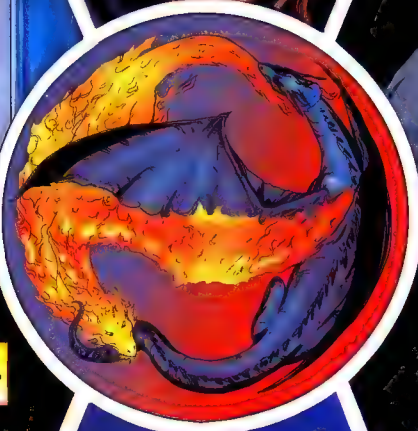
SHE REMEMBERS BEING ANOINTED--



--THEN MASKED.

SHE REMEMBERS WEeping, BOTH FOR HERSELF AND FOR THE FLAMEBIRD, NO LONGER CERTAIN IF THEY WERE NOT, IN FACT, ONE AND THE SAME.

WEeping FOR WHAT HAD BEEN TAKEN FROM THEM, THEIR FRIEND AND MATE AND LOVER, THE NIGHTWING.



LOST IN SOME UNKNOWN DARKNESS, JUST AS THEY HAD BEEN.



FOR EACH OF THEM, FLAMEBIRD AND THARA AK-VAR ALIKE, THIS IS THE WORST OF ALL POSSIBLE HELLS...

...TO BE CONDEMNED TO A LIFE ALONE.

CHRISTOPHER'S ISOLATION IS OF A DIFFERENT SORT ENTIRELY.

WHETHER NON ACTIVELY HID CHRISTOPHER FROM URSA AND ZOD, AS WELL AS THE OTHER PRISONERS, IS UNKNOWN.



WHAT CAN BE INTERPRETED AS DECEPTION CAN JUST AS EASILY BE READ AS A SIN OF OMISSION COMMITTED BY A DAMAGED MIND.



NON'S IMPAIRED FACULTIES, AS WELL AS THE SIZE OF FORT ROZ--THE PRISON WAS BUILT TO INCARCERATE OVER FIVE THOUSAND INMATES AT CAPACITY--MAKE EITHER SCENARIO JUST AS LIKELY.

AND NON'S ACTIVITIES HAD LONG SINCE BECOME BENEATH NOTICE OF ALL BUT URSA AND ZOD THEMSELVES, ALL THE MORE SO IN THE WAKE OF THEIR RECENT DEFEAT AT SUPERMAN'S HANDS.



FOR CHRISTOPHER, HOWEVER, THIS NEED TO REMAIN HIDDEN IS SECOND TO ONLY ONE THING:

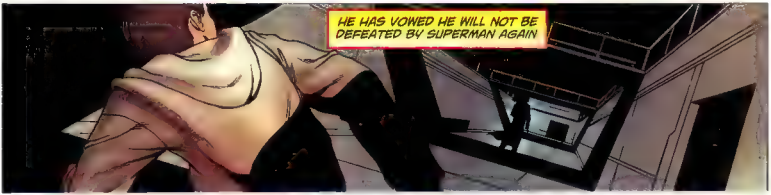
HIS DESIRE TO RETURN TO EARTH AND THE ONLY HAPPINESS, THE ONLY SAFETY, HE HAS EVER KNOWN.



HIS FATHER IS
DRIVEN BY OTHER
DESIRES ENTIRELY.



ZOD IS A GENERAL,
A MILITARY MAN WITH
A MILITARY MIND, AND
NOT ONE TO ACCEPT
ANY DEFEAT LIGHTLY.



HE HAS VOWED HE WILL NOT BE
DEFEATED BY SUPERMAN AGAIN



LIKE ALL GOOD GENERALS,
ZOD SEEKS TO LEARN FROM
HIS MISTAKES.



BUT SUPERMAN WAS
NOT GENERAL ZOD'S
FIRST DEFEAT.

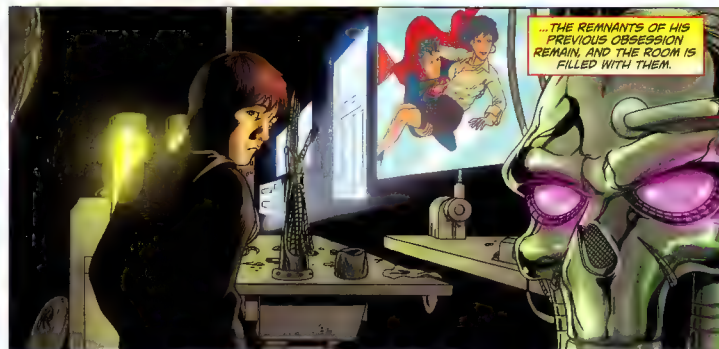
THAT HONOR--IF IT CAN BE CALLED THAT--GOES TO BRAINIAC, AND THE BLACK DAY THAT KANDOR WAS RIPPED FROM KRYPTON.

FOR DECADES PRIOR TO HIS ATTEMPTED CONQUEST OF EARTH, IT WAS BRAINIAC THAT HELD ZOD'S ATTENTION.

FOR YEARS, HE DEVOTED HIMSELF TO THE STUDY OF HIS ENEMY.



WHILE SUPERMAN WAS SUPPLANTED BRAINIAC IN ZOD'S ATTENTIONS...



...THE REMNANTS OF HIS PREVIOUS OBSESSION REMAIN, AND THE ROOM IS FILLED WITH THEM.



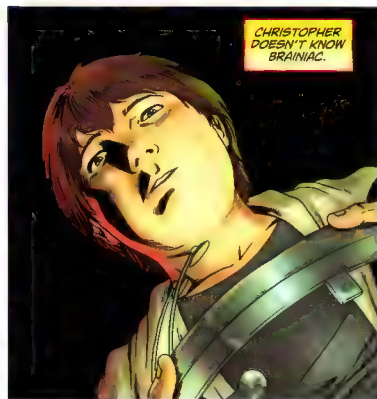
THOSE BITS AND PIECES OF BRAINIAC TECHNOLOGY THAT HAVE "WASHED UP" WITHIN THE PHANTOM ZONE DURING THE LONG YEARS OF IMPRISONMENT.

EVERYTHING ZOD COULD FIND, ANYTHING THAT MIGHT HELP HIM UNDERSTAND HIS ENEMY, ALL GATHERED HERE.



THOUGH THE ROOM FRIGHTENS CHRISTOPHER, THOUGH THE EQUIPMENT THERE CONFUSES HIM, IT GIVES HIM HOPE.

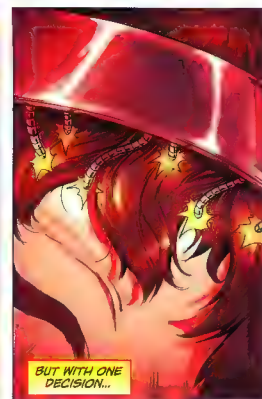
PERHAPS, IF HE CANNOT LEAVE THE PHANTOM ZONE TO JOIN THOSE HE'S LEFT BEHIND, HE CAN, IN SOME WAY, CONTACT THEM.



CHRISTOPHER DOESN'T KNOW BRAINIAC.



HE DOESN'T KNOW KANDOR.



BUT WITH ONE DECISION...



...HE DISCOVERS BOTH.



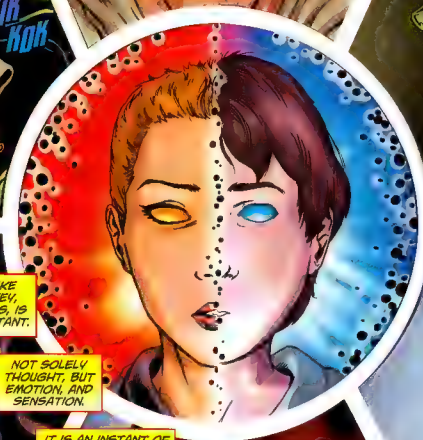
MACHINES THAT HAVE WAITED DORMANT FOR AGES SUDDENLY REAWAKEN.

VOICES AND MEMORIES AND KNOWLEDGE NOT HIS OWN BURN INTO HIS MIND.



HE DOESN'T HEAR HIS PARENTS AS THEY BURST INTO THE ROOM. HE DOESN'T SEE THE VIOLENCE HIS MIND HAS SUDDENLY UNLEASHED.

HE SEES ONLY HER.



ACROSS DIMENSIONS AND TIME AND SPACE, TWO MINDS MEET.

WHAT WOULD TAKE HOURS TO CONVEY, DAYS TO PROCESS, IS SHARED IN AN INSTANT.

NOT SOLELY THOUGHT, BUT EMOTION AND SENSATION.

IT IS AN INSTANT OF PERFECT UNITY AND UNDERSTANDING.



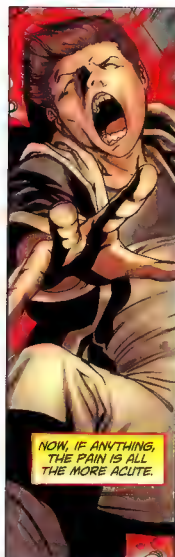
IT IS AN INDESCRIBABLE INSTANT OF BLISS.



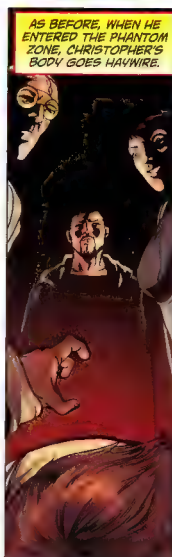
IT IS NOT, HOWEVER, WITHOUT PRICE...



...FOR EACH
OF THEM.



NOW, IF ANYTHING,
THE PAIN IS ALL
THE MORE ACUTE.



AS BEFORE, WHEN HE
ENTERED THE PHANTOM
ZONE, CHRISTOPHER'S
BODY GOES HAYWIRE.



NOW IT
COMES WITH
A SENSE OF
LOSS, AS
WELL AS
SHAME.

ONCE MORE, HE RACES
THROUGH YEARS IN A
MATTER OF SECONDS.



THARA



AND FOR THE FIRST TIME,
WITH THE MEMORY OF
JOY STILL LINGERING...

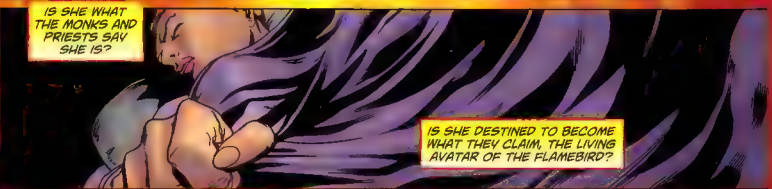


...CHRISTOPHER
FEELS DESPAIR.



THE FEELING IS SHARED BY THARA AK-VAR,
NOW WRESTLING WITH KNOWLEDGE THAT EATS
AT HER HEART AS MUCH AS HER THOUGHTS.

SO MUCH OF HER LIFE TO THIS
POINT HAS BEEN FRAMED BY
DOUBT, TO THE POINT THAT,
MORE THAN ONCE, SHE HAS
QUESTIONED HER OWN SANITY.



IS SHE WHAT
THE MONKS AND
PRIESTS SAY
SHE IS?

IS SHE DESTINED TO BECOME
WHAT THEY CLAIM, THE LIVING
AVATAR OF THE FLAMEBIRD?

NOW, FOR THE
FIRST TIME, SHE
IS CERTAIN.



NOW, FOR THE
FIRST TIME, SHE
TRULY BELIEVES
WHAT SHE HAS
REFUSED TO
ACCEPT.



AND SHE
KNOWS WHAT
SHE MUST DO.

HOW TO DO IT IS ANOTHER MATTER ENTIRELY.

THARA IS NOT SURPRISED WHEN BOTH ZOR-EL AND ALURA TELL HER THAT WHAT SHE'S DESCRIBING IS IMPOSSIBLE.

THAT, EVEN IF THERE WAS AN INNOCENT BOY TRAPPED IN THE PHANTOM ZONE, AS THARA CLAIMS, COMMUNICATION WITH HIM WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE.

AS TO ACTUALLY ENTERING THE ZONE TO "RESCUE" HIM, ZOR-EL BELIEVES IN THE THEORETICAL POSSIBILITY.

HE HAD EXPLORED A SIMILAR IDEA, THAT OF MANAGED ENTRY AND EXIT TO THE ZONE, AS A MEANS OF ESCAPE FROM BRAINIAC, USING ENCOUNTER SUITS AND A MODIFIED PHANTOM ZONE PROJECTOR.

A PROJECT HE HAS SINCE ABANDONED AT HIS WIFE'S BEHEST AS TOO DANGEROUS, NOT TO MENTION IMPRACTICAL.

WHILE NEITHER ALURA NOR ZOR-EL ARE WILLING TO DISCOUNT THARA'S VISIONS OUT OF HAND, THEY OFFER MORE SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATIONS.

PERHAPS HER IMAGINATION, INFLUENCED BY THE WORDS OF THE MONKS AND PRIESTS, IS RUNNING WILD?

PERHAPS IT WOULD BE BEST IF SHE LEFT THE RELIGIOUS GUILD AND RETURNED TO THEIR SERVICE?

TO THEIR DELIGHT, SHE AGREES.



FOR BOTH OF THEM.



TO THARA, THE PHANTOM ZONE IS
NOT SIMPLY AN ALTERNATE REALITY,
NOR A PRISON DIMENSION.



TO HER,
IT IS QUITE
LITERALLY
HELL.

AN INFINITE
HELL.



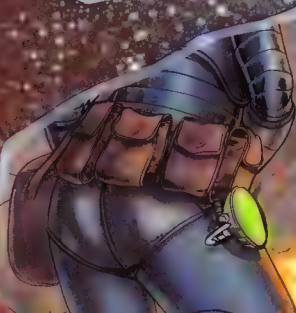
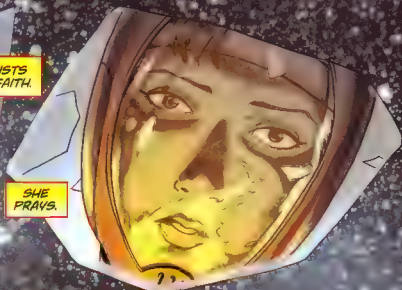
AND HIDDEN
SOMEWHERE WITHIN IT,
HER NIGHTWING.



SHE TRUSTS
TO HER FAITH.

SHE
PRAYS.

AND IS
REWARDED.



SINCE HIS CAPTURE, HE HAS BEEN INTERROGATED BY HIS FATHER, TORMENTED BY HIS MOTHER...

...AND TORTURED BY INMATES WHO HAVE USED HIM TO RELIEVE YEARS OF BOREDOM.

FAITH HAS BEEN THE ONLY THING THAT HAS KEPT CHRISTOPHER ALIVE.

HE REMEMBERS THE GIRL, AND THEIR CONNECTION. HE HOLDS ON TO THE WARMTH OF HER THOUGHTS, THE INTIMACY OF HER MIND.

THARA?

THE HOPE THAT SHE WILL COME FOR HIM.

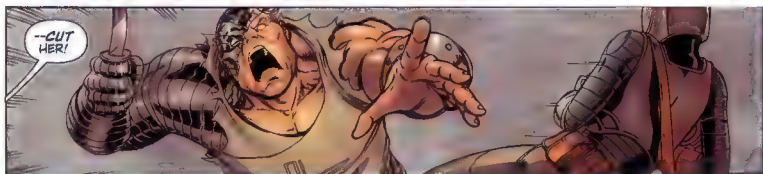
FOR THARA, THE MOMENT IS AN AWFUL CONFLUENCE, LOVE AND HATE COLLIDING IN THE SAME INSTANT.

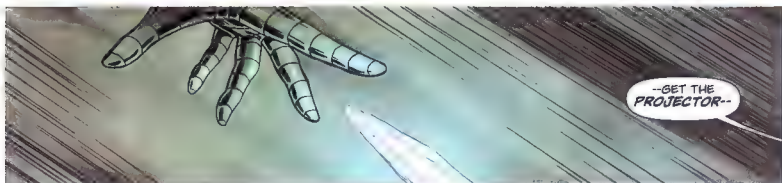
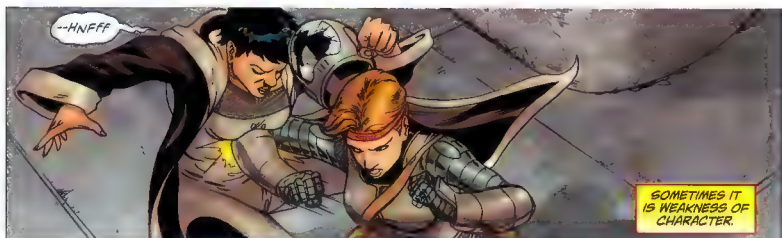
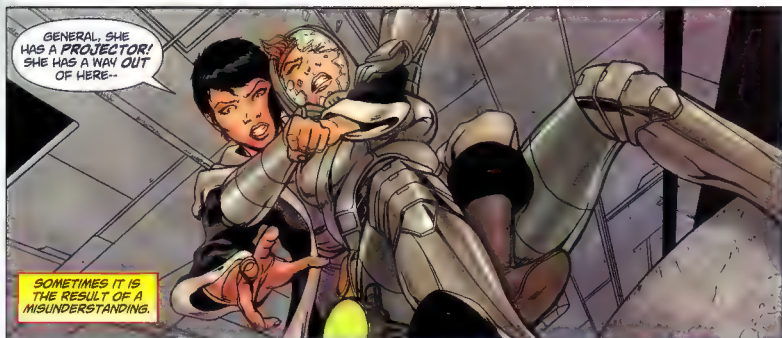
YOU!

THE SIGHT OF HER NIGHTWING, BEATEN AND BLOODIED...

...AND THE SIGHT OF URSA, THE WOMAN WHO LEFT HER PARENTS TO DIE.

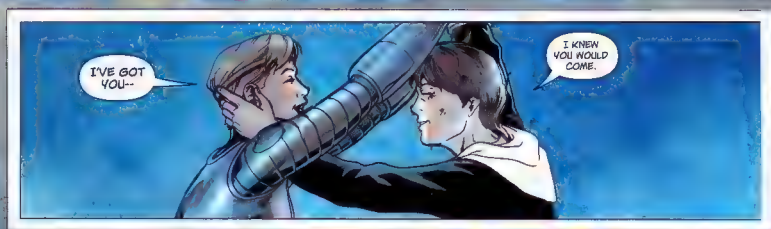
...AK-VAR?





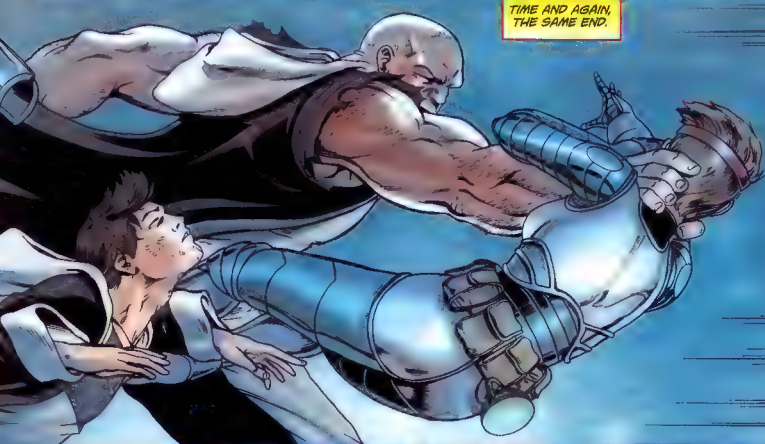


BUT MOST OFTEN, IN
THESE LEGENDS, IT IS
THE SAME DOWNFALL.

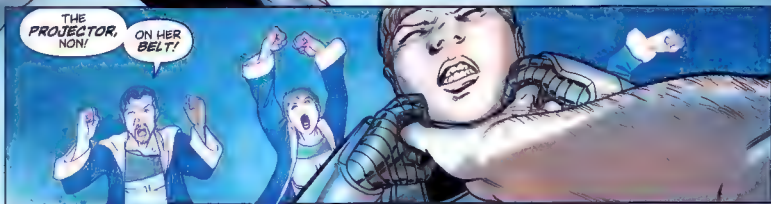


I'VE GOT
YOU--

I KNEW
YOU WOULD
COME.



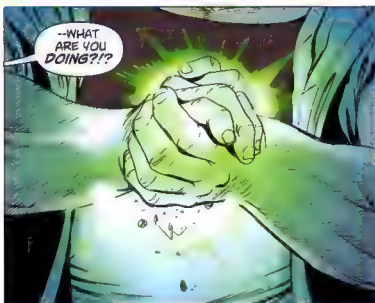
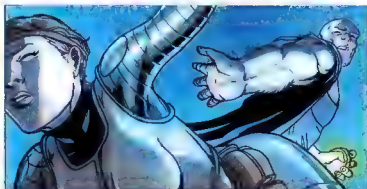
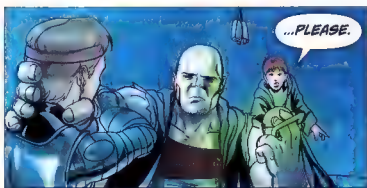
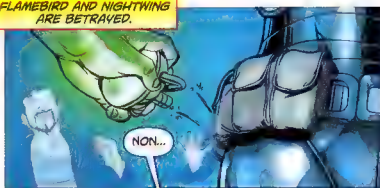
TIME AND AGAIN,
THE SAME END.



THE
PROJECTOR,
NON!

ON HER
BELT!

FLAMEBIRD AND NIGHTWING
ARE BETRAYED.





THIS TIME, THEIR
END IS YET TO
BE WRITTEN.

Greg RUCKA Writer
Pere PÉREZ Artist

MAZI Colorist

Rob LEIGH Letterer

Renato GUEDES Cover Artist

Wil MOSS Asst. Editor

Matt IDELSON Editor

SEVERAL

edited by
Amy Stuart
and
Tom Spurgeon

WILL MOSS

RED CIRCLE HAS ARRIVED



Photo: Jimmy Olsen

In the wake of the recent Crisis, new heroes -- and new threats -- seem to be appearing across America. In this collection of recent *Planet* pieces on several of these new arrivals, we invite you to find a broader pattern at work -- the possibility that perhaps something links these seemingly disconnected events. Writer

J. Michael Straczynski is currently preparing a new series of reports on the subject, which will seek to answer the many questions our initial coverage has posed. These reports will be published under the banner of "The Red Circle." Watch for them arriving on your newsstands weekly throughout the month of August.



"Hangman" Of The Old West Haunts San Francisco?

Witnesses Claim Mythic Figure Rides Again

by Hannah Stretab



Artist Jesus Saiz's rendition of the supposed "Hangman," reprinted from *"Weird Western Tales: A Children's Treasury Of Ghastly Frontier Horrors."* (Ohiyesa Press, 1976)

Perhaps the story was read to you in a book of ghost stories long ago in your childhood: a masked demon that bullets could not kill, who cast an inescapable noose around the necks of the guilty. Variants of the "Hangman" story have been recorded as far back as the Civil War, but seemed to vanish as the twentieth century loomed. But more and more San Francisco residents are coming forward to claim that it's not a myth -- the Hangman is real, and he's haunting the City by the Bay.

The accounts lack consistency -- in some tellings, he is a gaunt figure on a spectral horse, and in others, he's a hulking goliath who towers over a normal man. But all share a common setting -- the scene of a crime, or the hideaway of a suspected crimi-

nal. For that reason, San Francisco police are beginning to believe they may have a new metahuman vigilante on their hands.

Others aren't so sure. "We live in troubling times, and our minds are asked to cope with terrible things on an everyday basis," said Dr. Robert Dickering, an area physician specializing in acute trauma. "It's very easy for those who've suffered a terrible shock to fall back on myths and legends as a sort of safety blanket to protect themselves from the truth of our senseless lives. Who wouldn't want to believe that justice is inescapable? But sadly, our everyday lives reveal justice to be all too fickle."

The most generally reported sighting to date occurred one month ago.

(Continued in HANGMAN, Page A9)



Urban Legend Battles Burning Man – Or Does He?

SFPD Refuses Comment On Metahuman Involvement In Arson
by Fareed Santiago

SAN FRANCISCO--Federal and local officials remain on the hunt for the anonymous figure who is responsible for yesterday's explosions at San Francisco General Hospital and reportedly operates under the name "Inferno."

An APB was released for the suspect yesterday afternoon, depicting a tall, muscular man of indeterminate race with distinctive facial hair -- and a seemingly inexplicable resistance to fire. Indeed, unconfirmed eyewitness accounts indicate that the arsonist didn't just survive being lit on fire, he was

actively conjuring it from the air around him. The available photographs match no known pyrokinetic criminals, and sources in the police department indicate that they have no leads. It is not yet known how he eluded police custody after a spectacular waterfront explosion destroyed at least one luxury yacht.

Further complicating the case are widespread claims that the suspect was seen in pitched combat with the figure locally known as "the Hangman," whose presence SFPD vigorously denies.

(Continued in ARSON, Page A5)



The last photograph taken of the suspect before our photographer's trip to the burn ward.



OP-ED: The Hero You Deserve

Why I'm The Right Man To Right Your Wrongs

by The Web, Masked Adventurer



The author's publicity photo, available for sale as a signed glossy at his website.

I know what you've been thinking all these years, because I thought it, too. All those fancy super-heroes you see flying around -- they're all too busy with their multiverses to worry about *your* problems. You, the honest American who just needs a little extra help when the river floods, or you, the small-business owner those darned mobsters won't stop harassing about "protection." I get it. I've been there. They say Superman hears everything, but he didn't hear you call for help when your puppy ran away, did he? (OK, I'll admit there's probably a couple of you out there who did get your puppy saved by Superman. Congratulations, you're a statistically insignificant sample set. Go pet your puppy.)

But I'm here, folks. I'm here for you. And I'm listening. I'm not just called The Web -- I use the web to help you.

It's very simple: You visit my website. You tell me why you need my help. And if you need my help, I'm there for you. I can't solve every problem -- but I've got a few tricks up my sleeve, and I can take on more than you'd think. As I've always believed, technology will set us free --, free from the constraints that hold us back, and free from the rules that the old heroes have always used to keep us in our place.

Oh, and ladies, it never hurts to include a photo with your application. Just kidding! But seriously, keep your JPGs under 5MB, please.



After The Rollout Of "The Shield," Questions Linger

Soldier's Missions, Family Ties Both Cloudy

by Ron Troupe

WASHINGTON -- After a spectacular unveiling ceremony, and the promise of revolutionary new developments in how America arms its fighting men and women, defense commentators are beginning to ask questions about Lieutenant Joe Higgins, who will apparently operate publicly as a super-operative codenamed "The Shield." Concerns are rising that his first mission may find him deployed in Bialya, where anti-metahuman tensions remain exceptionally high after Black Adam's rampage a year ago, but where the US military reportedly cannot accept another failed provisional government.

Lt. Higgins is said to be the first soldier to volunteer to wear a profoundly experimental suit based around nanotechnology, which the government says is seeing its first trials and is not yet ready for wider deployment, for reasons of both cost and safety. Specific details were not provided, but Lt. Higgins' eligibility for the trial appears to be related to injuries suffered in the line of duty on an undisclosed mission earlier this year. Army officials have also noted that Lt. Higgins has no surviving family, but journalists for the *Planet* have yet to independently confirm the death of his father, a biotechnology researcher.

(Continued in AMERICA'S SHIELD, Page A8)



The Shield flies his colors in his official DoD portrait.



This is some way to kick off the summer, isn't it?

We're done battling for the cowl, and now we can move on to the awesomeness that is Batman, Detective Comics, Red Robin, Batman: Streets of Gotham, Gotham City Sirens, The Outsiders, and of course Batman & Robin. By my count we're ushering in this new age of Batman with four new #1 issues, two new co-features starring The Question and Manhunter, one new Batman, two new Robins, three Sirens and zero Bruce Wayne. And Dan says I'm bad at math.

Even with all this excitement, it still seems like something's missing. Let's see: Dick Grayson as Batman? Check. The all-star writing team of Grant Morrison, Paul Dini, Greg Rucka, Judd Winick, Christopher Yost, Marc Andreyko, and Pete Tomasi? Check. The dream team of artists Frank Quitely, JH Williams, Dustin Nguyen, Ed Benes, Cully Hamner, Ramon Bachs, Georges Jeanty, Lee Garbett and Guillem March? Check. Variant covers by JG Jones? Check. Batgirl? Che... Ah, that's it!

As some of you may have noticed, Batgirl is suspiciously absent from our current Bat-roster. That's a little strange, don't you think? It's almost like we have something planned for Batgirl this year. In fact, we have Batgirl #1 coming your way this August by writer Bryan Q. Miller, artist Lee Garbett and covers by Phil Noto. We're quite stoked with this creative team and know that they have something really special planned that puts Batgirl right in the center of the Bat-Universe. Bryan comes to us as a writer on *Smallville* and will pretty much blow your mind with his talent, while Lee and Phil are going to make this one of the coolest-looking Batgirl projects ever.

So you want to know just a little more? Well, if I were a betting man, I'd put my money on there being a new Batgirl costume. On the other hand, I wouldn't place any bets on who's going to be wearing that costume because those are tough odds to hit. One thing's for sure: you're going to be guessing who gets to say, "I am Batgirl" up until the very end.

— Ian Sattler, Senior Story Editor DCU

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